

From Babel to Hitchcock: Suture, Interpolation, and Absence in the Formation of Architectural Meaning

Donald Kunze

The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pennsylvania, USA

Abstract

Hitchcock's famous *Rear Window* (1954) was filmed entirely within a set constructed to model a typical Greenwich Village urban courtyard. The film's protagonist, a photographer convalescing with a broken leg, struggles with the ethics of his favorite pastime, watching his neighbors from his studio window. His girlfriend struggles to gain his attention and affection, but wins only as she takes over the role of amateur detective in solving a murder mystery.

The set of *Rear Window* is striking. It is an architectural topology of linguistic confrontations, a latter-day version of the famous *Ur*-model of communications, the Tower of Babel. With borrowings from film theory, the "philosophy" of Jacques Lacan, and a few other sources, we can easily find a hidden complexity that simultaneously informs the polemic surrounding contemporary ideas of architecture. *Rear Window*, even today, retains its title as a central metaphor for knowing urban and domestic spaces and their relationships.

[insert Fig. 1]

So, Why Is This Architecture? (Geometry *versus* Topology)

Some authors of architecture essays get asked this question; so getting it out of the way may clear the air. Frequent repetition of the word “architecture,” accompanied by photos and drawings, is the standard way of signaling the authenticity of architectural ideas. But, isn’t this term, the central mission of our thinking, frustratingly blank? Referring both to objects and experiences, “architecture” is both deep and broad. It touches on every aspect of life, and in fact one gauge of architecture’s quality is this intersection with ordinary experience, without any reference to theoretical goals or standards. Architecture theory frequently ignores this clear case for its own relevance, and develops a hermetic language tuned to professional anxieties and certified authorities.

Confusion should not be a required outcome of reading theory texts, but difficulty is a natural component of any productive move forward. Topics bridge disciplines and ideologies, and a bridge requires a metaphoric kind of understanding. Difficulty is what we experience when we turn from our non-metaphorical worlds — where metaphor is in fact suppressed — to a kind of thinking that requires metaphor to move any productive inch forward.

Architecture theory should be for everyone who wishes to think seriously about the human condition. Any and all things that bear on that condition are “fair game,” and uppermost those who speak intelligently — thought not always simply — about the human condition must be heard. Everyone has a list. Mine includes Plato, who laid the foundations for assessing the role of the spirit in all things; Giambattista Vico, who saw human history as a single span of creation, from the divine illusions of metaphor to the debased literal propagandistic speech that George Orwell held to be the hallmark of modern times. Piranesi produced images that captured this pessimism; later Calvino was to find hope in the remains of the human day.

In our time, the contrarian psychology-philosophy of Jacques Lacan has insisted on what Heidegger had made clear in his *Being and Time*: that humans are, by their nature, out of place in the natural world, and that the artificial world they build is replete with the symptoms (“*sinthoms*”) of this unsettled nature.¹ This is not necessarily a pessimistic view. Our pains also, curiously, give us pleasure, and no animal enjoys a more refined, layered, or synæsthetic form of pleasure than humans. The complexity of pleasure, which can never be viewed separately from the formative individual and collective traumas of human life, is

the essential grounding component of architecture. We simplify it at our peril. We cannot falsify pleasure by pretending that it is “natural” to desire only good things or detest only bad things. The circularity of contemporary architectural discourse on the subject of pleasure is owed mainly to a half-century of domination by logical positivism, behaviorist psychology, and mechanistic theories of culture. Even pop-cultural New Age affection for Buddhism and exotic cultures has cultivated the ideal of the *only if*: “We will find peace and happiness *only if* . . .” (some condition of society, thought, or personal action could be met).

This essay would be about architecture even if it were only about pleasure, but it also attempts to ground a particular form of pleasure identified by psychology and film theory — “suture” — in a primordial example of meta-architecture, the Biblical “Tower of Babel,” a structure that is used to mark the end of a universal, “Adamic” speech (perfect congruity of words and things) and the subsequent “confusion of tongues” (multiplicity of languages) Once grounded in the “topology” of pleasure, suture reveals just how many and modern our Towers of Babel can be.

Tradition holds that the failure of the building is linked to the power of Adamic speech and the threat it posed to God, who destroyed the Tower and multiplied human languages. The tower’s design is, thus, linked to the “ideal symmetry” of that hypothetical first speech. But, just as Lacan says “there is no meta-language,” no Adamic speech; there is really no meta-architecture, no “key” that is capable of unraveling mysteries of subsequent, lesser works. Babel, however, shows clearly how architecture can develop out of a “symptom,” or rather a structure of symptoms (a Lacanian term we might borrow for symptoms employed by art is “sinthom”). Thus, when we find another work of art, some thousands of years later, with the same structure as Babel, it is time to take notice.

Hitchcock’s set for *Rear Window* is in itself a phenomenal monument to artistic planning. A “typical” Manhattan (Greenwich Village) residential courtyard was reconstructed entirely inside Paramount studio in Hollywood. Rooms around the courtyard were wired for sound communication and light control and were fully furnished and painted to make sure that the lighting effects would be realistic. The set lighting, which effectively simulated daylight, was so intense that the lamps’ heat triggered the automatic sprinklers, and the set had to be cleared until the resulting lake on the floor could be drained.²

Hitchcock was, if anything, a careful planner. He is credited with inventing the use of storyboards, which detailed each individual shot. Scenes could be filmed in story sequence because everything, from camera position and movement to the background sounds, was planned in advance. So, almost everything that happens in the film was “intended,” except for an unexpected flash in an upper-story room during the opening sequence. The film, like Babel, is an “overdetermined” work of art. Additionally, Hitchcock’s interest in combining the *demand* of the audience

for a puzzle with the complex *desire* for fright meant that the “message” resides in the structures created *between* the work of art and the audience. It must be read in terms of emotion as well as knowledge.

Geometry and Topology: Symbolic Meaning *versus* Interpolation

When we look at architecture as it’s represented in other media, we must use a topological rather than a geometrical imagination. This means that *form* is, by its nature, mutant. Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* is in many senses a key architectural text. Form equals *trans-form-ation*. In contrast, geometries too often induce a sleep of reason: a search for patterns that fit, for lines that converge, for secret numbers and ratios. This is not to discount the role of geometry but, rather, to distinguish between the *relatively few* topological structures that are the real evidence of our use of built spaces and the *relatively many* geometrical approximations of these structures.

While geometry is by its very nature symbolic, projective, and representational, topology is not. Its role is played behind the scenes of the visible. If there’s any truth within the joke about the idiot who looked for his watch beneath a street lamp “because the light was better there,” then we should suspect that easy answers are not about topology. Architecture’s mysteries take place mostly in the dark.

A model for topology’s role in art could be Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, a book that is frequently found on architecture school reading lists. The book is itself a literary topology, which tells us much of what we need to know to design houses, buildings, cities. It is an *interpolation* of topics that begins with memory and ends with hiding. In between these spring-points, numbered topical cities add one topic while another is symmetrically dropped, creating an arch-like structure that reminds one of *terza rima*, Dante’s three-part rhyme scheme for the *Divine Comedy* (ABA, BCB, CDC ...). It turns out that interpolation is not just a stylistic preference but also a time-honored artistic tradition for connecting impossible twins, such as possibility/impossibility, life/death (in the form of Romulus and Remus — Rome!), body/mind (Kant), sense/spirit (Hegel), reality/Real (Lacan), low/high (Babel), love/hate (*Rear Window*).

Lacan’s three psychic elements (Real, symbolic, imaginary) and their material anchors (the “object-cause of desire,” the Big Other of authority, and the subject barred by symbolic convention) can be located within a Möbius band-like device that is a fractal or monad of city essence. This device has many apparent geometries but only a few, essential topologies. One kind of topology is the “idiotic symmetry” created by any boundary, which can make any material distinction function in self-contradicting ways. Boundaries are most often relative. What is inside or outside depends on where you stand. This complexity can be seen

readily in the boundaries of art. The “frame,” a simple device separating the audience from the work of art, often becomes a mirror, gateway, or puzzle.

What is the difference between a topology and a geometry? Topologies work whether they are inverted or upright, left-handed or right-handed; but geometries take the “fact” of inversion or left-right confusion as a kind of catastrophe with dramatic, religious, or philosophical significance. At the folk-ethical level, for example, left is typically the “evil” side while right stands for the good. Both art and philosophy, however, have a penchant for showing how quickly what we *think* is good converts to evil, and how what begins as evil is often discovered to be good. One could say that topology “makes fun of” geometry’s initial conceptions and false alarms. Because topological ideas are by definition *unrepresentable* in any symbolic or graphic way, geometry’s job seems to be to valorize the “truth” of topology by misrepresenting it. When topological ideas appear in representational terms, they take the form of a trauma, a trick, or a magic event. A Möbius band, for example, is unrepresentable. Its topology is represented as the “trick” of a twist in the juncture of the two ends.

[insert Fig. 2]

But, the twist we see in graphic depictions does not “take place” in the topology of the band itself, which is revealed through various techniques as a single surface with a single edge. The Real, similarly, has no representational “surface” other than a false one, where falsity itself becomes a means of “discovery” psychologically related to trauma.

This trick of revealing the Real, the unrepresentable, has been given a special name: “suture.” Film theory has borrowed this idea from Lacanian psychology and worked it into a comprehensive account of the audience’s (unrepresentable) entry into the illusionary interior of the art work. The classic account of suture can be found in Stephen Heath’s landmark book, *Question of Cinema*.³ Heath documents the development of the idea of suture from Lacan’s account of “sliding signifiers” — the metonymical chains of terms that might substitute for one another in the construction of metaphorical meaning — to Oudart’s more film-specific interpretations.

In articles published in the *Cahiers du cinema*, Oudart and others carried Lacan’s ideas into a general theory of reception. Here, the process of “reading” a film moves in stages. (1) the viewer revels in the sheer illusion of the image, untroubled by the “artifacts” involved with the creation of that image — the frame, camera motion, the screen, the tricks of editing, etc. (2) The first awareness of these breaks this initial spell, and the viewer now sees the film in terms of its limits — the “fourth wall” (the side of the set occupied by the camera, crew, and

caterers); the artificiality of the film; the artificial conventions of filming and story-telling.

Meaning at this point focuses on the issue of *absence*: “the Absent One.” What is missing from the view on the screen can be absent in multiple ways. It can be “off screen” as an artifact, in the way an actor might be standing beyond the edge of the screen or behind the “fourth wall,” getting coffee at the catering stand. Alternatively, characters could be absent as a part of the story. This absence calls attention to the status of material directly visible on the screen *as signifiers*, where parts are clues about the whole. This ambiguity of absence leads to a third step in the dialectic of film-viewing: (3) The audience thinks, “Someone intends to tell me/us something,” as consciousness becomes collective self-consciousness. The restoration of whatever is missing in the image becomes key to the status of the signifier and its meaning, which is now a puzzle and not “just a story.”

This is to say, absence creates both the destruction of naïve illusion and, subsequently, the key behind the resolution of the film as a work of art. How absence will be liquidated by presence is now dependent on what *kind of* absence it was in the first place. Was it the calculated absence of Pinkerton in *Madama Butterfly*? Or was it the kind of existential absence of Betty in David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*, when Rita gets sucked through the blue box, “suturing” the story back to the corpse of Diane and the hobo behind Winkies?

Babel as a Model of Absence

[insert Fig. 3]

As the Tower of Babel demonstrates so dramatically, absence “makes the art go flounder.” There, absence is the unfinished, destroyed, or invisible top of the massive structure designed to assault heaven. Babel’s subsequent role as a linguistic anecdote is both in error and true. (Later, we will say that it is a truth “interpolated” from the “base” misappropriation of detail.) The Hebrew version of the story mistranslates *Bab-El* — the “gate of God” — as the Hebrew *balal*, to confuse or mix.⁴ The word, ironically, accounts for this error of translation. Idiotically, it *names itself*. The top of the tower is “the Absent One” of suture theory. Its absence calls into question the existence of the building — of all building — as a signifier or, rather, set of signifiers whose sliding back and forth along metonymic chains calls for the stabilizing act of (heroic) “quilting,” where some new meaning, functioning as a *return* of some missing element (the Real, in

Lacan's psychology, is what always *returns*), finally pins or puns signifiers into a new relationship. The hero in classical mythology is "he who returns," particularly from the Underworld.

The trick behind suture is easier to see in architectural models of slipping and sliding. Representations of the Tower of Babel write this trick in capital letters. The labyrinth, another kind of "first building," involves a literally recursive schema whose passageways literally "slip and slide" past one another. Its repetition of a turn, reverse, and re-turn at different scales makes the labyrinth a fractal *par excellence*.

Sliding Signifiers: The Marlboro Man

We are more familiar with this process than the terminology of Lacan would suggest. The Marlboro cigarette was, in the 1920s, marketed as a "woman's" or "sophisticate's" cigarette, something for the tuxedo-wearing theater-goer.

[insert Fig. 4]

As sales lagged far behind the competition in the 1950s, Philip Morris hired the famous advertising agency, Leo Burnett, to reverse the downward trend. Burnett turned to a popular-culture image from the Wild West: the cowboy. The cigarette had strong appeal among World War II vets stuck behind desks.⁵ Zizek makes the point that, before the Marlboro Man, the particular aggregate image known as "Marlboro Country" did not exist.⁶ It was a "hapax" (unprecedented but immediately recognizable) formation, like Little Miss Muffet's tuffet. The sliding signifiers (overlapping images of wilderness, male fantasy projections, the West as uninhabited space of adventure, etc.) were "quilted" by the Marlboro Man and his country, which would forever on bear the brand (in all senses) of the cigarette-smoking cowboy.

In architecture as well as advertising, quilting uses the metonymical aspect of signifiers, their "accidental" associations, to create substantial, metaphoric, whole images. The circumstantial instable, metonymical components (the materiality of walls, the shadows of a parapet, the smell of plaster, etc.) combine and provide a case that architecture experience is, primarily, synæsthetic in its quilting of miscellaneous sensations into a new, composite hapax formation.

In the Tower of Babel, accidents combine like strands of DNA. The linguistic confusion about the name of the tower "just happens to be" coincident with the conflicts between the various craftsmen who use different terms to refer to the same building conditions. The top of the tower as unfinished merges with the idea of a head disappearing into ether as it communicates directly with the divine. The

“Gate of God” is, indeed, an opening on to the fundamental emptiness and Absence of the Other, the gap between disappearance and non-existence. The Assyrian king who climbs to the top of the tower’s predecessor, the ziggurat, to consult a goddess is somehow the same as the hero who descends to the center of the earth to confront a horrible composite monster. Both return from Nowhere, and are the better for it.

In *Rear Window*, the geometry of Babel is inverted but the topology remains the same. Outside is now inside, the spiral form is now the spiraling gaze, the missing top (now a bottom) is occupied not by a king and a goddess but by a murderer and the decapitated head he buries in the garden. But: the topology remains the same: the “goddess” is still invisible. The hero, Jefferies, “cannot see” his beautiful girlfriend Lisa (Grace Kelly); the villain Thorwald has “disappeared” his wife through an act of murder.⁷ One looks and the other looks back, but not until the spool of narrative has wound up its separate strands, fate-like, onto a spindle of circumstance.

[insert Fig. 5]

Rear Window

Hitchcock’s film *Rear Window* (1954) demonstrates that even an “inverted” Tower of Babel conveys the same quilted conundrums. In fact, the fact of inversion itself plays a crucial role, a kind of “idiotic symmetry,” in aligning the characters (pursuer and pursued) and in pulling the audience into the interior of the work. This is the phenomenon of “suture,” the film-theoretical map of the audience’s imaginary movement into a film. Suture is also the role of self-reference, recursion, or “inside frame” that requires urban form to take up its topologies in both fiction and reality.

The film begins with a pan of the urban courtyard that is now the temporary *teatro moral* of an invalided photographer, “Jeff” Jefferies (whose name is “a name of itself”), as well as a perfect example of an “inside frame.” The exterior pan continues inside Jefferies’ apartment, passing over objects of his adventurous occupation: photographs of an atomic explosion, a cover-girl, and the racing accident that probably was the cause of the Speed Graphic camera we see smashed on the table.⁸

[insert Fig. 6]

Jeff gets a visit from the caustic masseuse, Stella (Thelma Ritter), who provides some necessary exposition about Jeff’s waning romance with the lovely and rich Lisa (Grace Kelly), a woman of apparent influence in the fashion business.

Chastizing him for casting too keen an eye on “Miss Torso,” a dancer across the courtyard, and other neighbors, Stella sets voyeurism as a central theme.

And, what word could more characterize the main activity of any theater audience, whose curtain on to the worlds of fictional characters is perfectly mimicked by the three slowly raised curtains of Jeff’s apartment in the opening credits? This and other parallels between the audience’s desire to watch cinema and Jeff’s curiosity about his neighbors and their dysfunctional lives is intensified when voyeurism gets in the way of Lisa’s attempts to nurse Jeff out of his cast and into a secure job as a fashion photographer. He can’t turn away from his window, and, when the troubles of a couple directly opposite turn sinister, his interest turns to obsession.

What “hooks” Jeff is what is meant to hook the audience as well, and when Jeff tries to get Lisa and Stella on his side, it’s audience consensus that’s at stake. Jeff conjectures that a jewelry salesman (Lars Thorwald, played by Raymond Burr) has murdered his nagging, invalid wife, Anna. This is an “idiotic” inversion of Jeff and Lisa’s relationship; Jeff is the invalid but Lisa “nags” him about marriage. Lars sells jewelry (an optical inverse of the camera lens), Lisa sells expensive clothes and lights up Jeff’s apartment with romantic visits catered by *The 21 Club*. Anna laughs at Lars’ cooking and Jeff rolls his eyes at the baked lobster. This is the point where the audience knows enough to side with Lisa, and later follow *her* skepticism past the naïve acceptance of the appearance of murder.

As clues pile up, Jeff converts Lisa and the even more skeptical Stella. A war buddy turned policeman (Thomas Doyle, played by Wendell Corey) is called in to consult but continually gives Thorwald the benefit of the doubt. Jeff’s powerful telephoto lens gives the audience, who looks through it with him, an insider’s point of view. The plot hinges on finding evidence that Thorwald’s wife is not just away on a visit but dead. When Jeff sees Thorwald go through Anna’s purse, pulling out jewelry, Lisa reasons that no woman would ever leave her jewelry *or* handbag behind, even for a trip to the hospital. This general principle is distilled into a search for Anna’s wedding ring.

Lisa’s view takes over where Jeff’s gets mired in supposition, and Lisa herself climbs into Thorwald’s apartment to retrieve the missing ring. Jeff has lured Thorwald out of his apartment by playing a would-be blackmailer, but Thorwald returns too soon and catches Lisa in the act. Jeff and Stella watch in horror from across the courtyard as Thorwald shoves Lisa violently, but the police arrive just in time. The audience thinks the search has failed and Lisa will have ended her adventure with a burglary charge; but, with her back turned to the open window, Lisa signals to Jeff by pointing to the wedding ring. She’s concealed it by slipping it onto her own finger: a wry semiotic touch since Lisa, as unmarried, turns the ring into a *pure sign*, a literal “empty signifier.”

Thorwald also notices this signal, and is now able to look directly at his tormentor, back through the vignettted O-view of the telephoto lens. The two sides of the courtyard are now collapsed as the counter-gaze “collapses” the spy-gaze.

[insert Fig. 7]

After the police take Lisa away, he circles around the block to invade Jeff’s apartment. Jeff, stuck in his wheelchair, defends himself by setting off a series of flashbulbs to temporarily blind his attacker, but Thorwald manages to reach Jeff and shove him out of the window. In the final scenes, we see the “fourth wall,” the windows out of which Jeff has surveilled his courtyard. The police below the window break his fall and, above, capture the killer, but Jeff is left with two broken legs and a new roommate, Lisa, presumably happier for the bargain.

Public Space, Private Space

There are a number of points of departure in comparing the two geometries (but single topology) of the Tower of Babel and Rear Window. This is not an idiosyncratic comparison to illustrate the topological approach or “Lacanian architecture” but, rather, an open territory that could be traversed by many paths.

What should the enterprising explorer expect to encounter?

- **Themes of dysfunction** predominate and signify through negation. These include dysfunctions of motility (Jeff’s broken leg, the limitation of filming to a single set, the spiral motion of the Tower of Babel, the panning action of the camera); semblance dysfunction (the invisible or missing top of the Tower of Babel, the “whodunit” aspect of all mysteries); and scale dysfunction (Babel intends to span between the mortal realm and divine heaven, *Rear Window’s* “violation of normal optics” in order expand the miniature space of clues).
- **Idiotic couples:** We would like to see ourselves as others see us, but we can only envision our problems in terms of the moral flaws we see in those “opposite” us who “mirror” us (the symmetry of pursuer and pursued in the characters of *Rear Window* — Lars/Anna are opposite/identical to Jeff/Lisa). “Idiotic symmetry” involves using the truth in a fictionalized way, to *deny* its truth-value as a way of “proving” its ultimate, more complex form of truth. The idiotic (= private) implies

symmetry, in fact begs for it in the form of a topology that is an “emblem” of the human condition, intensified in the idea of the city’s construction of internal frames. *Rear Window* is a perfect example: its symmetry is “idiotic,” its inverted space (interior courtyard) is a microcosm by virtue of being an “outside-in,” and its use of sounds, images, food, touch, etc. are *sinthoms* of art’s relationship to this symmetry.⁹ Sinthoms don’t symbolize, they signify through absence, negation, and inversion. The ring is an “empty signifier,” an “O” that “stands for ‘nothing’,” the ‘nothing’ of a murdered wife.

- **Quadratic themes predominate** in the realization of public space — why? The victim of ancient ritual is divided into four parts (*templum*), forming a cosmicized interior. This expanded interior becomes a screen, a surface of projection or marks used for divination and a conjunction-of-opposites (interior/sky). The four edges of this interior cross are inverted to form a space (public square; the 3+1 interior courtyard of *Rear Window*). The “fourth wall” points to the theme of the “dead audience,” the imaginary subject-supposed-to-know that is, paradoxically, the *imaginary fantasy of the characters*.¹⁰
- **Symmetry and looking:** Symmetry, idiotic symmetry, brings the audience into the topological heart of the work of art. It “sutures” the imagination to the center despite the conscious recognition of the art work’s illusion. In addition, suture can be thematized directly, through devices, objects, and situations. For example, in shooting a “reverse-angle shot” (back-and-forth views of two people conversing), the camera should never cross the line drawn between the two subjects and the camera’s two alternative positions. Doing so inverts the audience’s sense of left and right (geometric symmetry), confusing the *identity* of the characters. Another film convention prohibits actors from looking directly at the camera (doing so implies a kind of “stage whisper”). Suture occurs in *Rear Window* precisely under these conditions. Thorwald “looks back directly” into Jeff’s telephoto lens, and Jeff’s fall is the occasion for the camera to cross the line protecting the geometric left-right conception of the courtyard.
- **Suture:** In *Rear Window*, suture is most evident in the discovery scene, where Thorwald sees Lisa signal to Jeff that she’s found the wedding ring and gazes back at his accuser. Thorwald locates Jefferies’ apartment with an “acoustic suture,”

by phoning him to locate his exact apartment number. The final physical suture of Thorwald's invasion of Jeff's apartment shows that suture's topology is created by interpolation. Reeling between the explosions of Jeff's flash-bulbs that vignette the view for the audience, the murderer "interpolates" the distance between him and his victim. Interpolation has been the basis of the film's movement from exterior to interior view and is the very topology of the Tower of Babel (spiral). Even the name "Jeff Jefferies," interpolates. Jeff is nicknamed "for himself." (We only see a suggestion of his real name: the initials "L. B" written on his leg cast.) Lisa interpolates her name as well, as she turns on lights in the napping Jeff's apartment: "Lisa" (click), "Carol" (click), "Freemont" (click). Illumination and interpolation, Hitchcock is saying, are as synonymous for the mystery story as blindness and insight were to Sophocles' *Œdipus Rex*.

These abbreviated notes beg for amplification and connection but not simplification. What is needed is a "study method," a means of taking up issues so that each successive meditation builds upon the past and creates a future without mortgaging thought to a pre-ordained aim. A study method is like a journey, in which a guide can provide essential support. A guide that knows too much is as bad as one who knows too little. The best guide is one who "knows without knowing," i.e. a guide able to incorporate the unknown into gesture, action, and de-monstration. In this way, the guide provides a means of "interpolation," of moving from the status of a no-nothing stranger to that of an informed spectator of a strange land. I would suggest a Marxist approach.

[insert Fig. 8]

The Marx Brothers

This comedic family group, sometimes four, sometimes three brothers, was known for their use of verbal humor. Many jokes sprang from misunderstandings between Chico, who seemed to be an Italian immigrant, and Groucho, who exhibited the speech and mannerisms of a second-generation Jewish entrepreneur. Harpo, a true clown, communicated through gesture, music, and rude sounds such as a bicycle horn he somehow managed to carry with him at all times. Beppo was in many ways not a "Marx Brother." He rarely took part in comic routines and typically played the "straight man." Taken together, the Marx Brothers personify Vico's stages of the "ideal eternal history." Harpo represents the mute or mythic

phase of human development, Chico is the transitional and “heroic” figure, and Beppo stands for the final human, devoid of a sense of irony. Groucho is the “*ricorso*” (re-turning) figure who inverts the last stage into one of pure figure and poetic device. Frequently he does this through language, and one of his most effective devices is suture.

For example, in this exchange Groucho shows that the best device for lying is telling the truth. “Gentlemen, Chicolini here may talk like an idiot, and look like an idiot, but don't let that fool you: he really is an idiot!”

In another famous Marx Brothers skit, a double enacts an elaborate “dance” to convince Groucho that he is looking into a mirror. When we look into a mirror, the image “convinces” us that we are standing in a space beyond the glass surface; this trick doubles the illusion, to restore the mirror as a surface of “deceit.”

That suture is a matter of interpolation is shown in the following sequence: Hammer (Groucho) says, “Now here is a little peninsula and here is a viaduct leading over to the mainland.” Chico, in heavily accented English, asks “Why a duck” (pronouncing it “Vhy a duck?”). Hammer explains that it’s not a matter of ducks, that a viaduct is a large bridge that spans over a valley. Chico again asks, “Why a duck.” Hammer tries again: You know, there’s a valley, with trees, and in the middle of the valley there’s a pond, and in the pond, you know, there are some ducks. Elated, Chico exclaims, “So *that’s* why a duck!”

It’s not that Groucho “gradually gives in” to Chico’s absurd demand that “viaduct” is really “Vhy a duck?” The “Why a duck?” is contained within the original word’s sounds — a suppressed surplus — from the beginning. Like dynamite ready to explode, it lies ready for misinterpretation, a seed planted subversively, metonymically, within the sounds of the word whose literal meaning is nowhere as interesting as the poetic-comic “Why a duck?” Both Hammer and Chico are satisfied, because neither veers from his “misconception.” “That’s vhy a duck!” sounds to Hammer as if Chico has learned from the example. Idiomatic symmetry and interpolation are two aspects of the same process of accommodation of opposites.

We learn from the Marx brothers, more readily perhaps than from Lacan, that the process of interpolation builds out from an impossible position. It adds gradually to a conventional impasse. It winds and twists from the conventional standard to the idiotic, poetic, ecstatic alternative. Interpolation is a model of *what happens in all art*. Of course it happens in architecture, in examples that are too easily dismissed as absurd: There is a wall in Genoa, Italy, made of brick. It is plastered over, thickly. The plaster is painted to simulate a brick wall. And you ask, “Why a duck?”¹¹

With the Tower of Babel, interpolation is a matter of architecture. Marco Frascari has said that the real “babble” of Babel was created by the

incommensurable terms and techniques of the various craftsmen involved. Anyone who has had to manage a construction site even today knows this to be the case. The Viaduct stage of Babel begins, according to Cesare Cesariano, with the *ichnography* of the plan and foundations and proceeds through the impossible *orthography* of levels, floors, walls, openings.¹² One can imagine that the second millennium BCE was no better than the present day: materials delivered late or not at all, plans misread; strikes, kickbacks and bribery; union disputes; unpaid bills.

As for *scenography*, the third of Cesariano's stages of design where the inside and outside are reconciled, the epithet for the Tower of Babel was "the building with the uplifted head." This referred not only to the presumed extreme height of the pinnacle but to the religious function of the head, as the highest organ, the one part of the body capable of uniting directly with the divine. In emblems of Justizia, for example, the head of the goddess seems to be invisible, but in actuality it is in direct contact with the divine *æther*, making it invisible from below. The invisibility of the head in contact with the divine translated into the idea of an unfinished or destroyed top in the Hebrew interpolation of the myth.

Again, the confusion that substituted absence or failure for invisibility is really the set-up scene, a prior state of delusion. The audience below interprets its *failure to see* into the lack of something. "If we don't see it, it doesn't exist" would be the paraphrase. Monsters are always perceived thus. Monstrosity is the lack of fit; the incongruity of form pied or scrambled into a puzzle or meaningless jumble — the wall in Genoa painted to look like itself; Chiccolinni who looks like an idiot and *is* an idiot. We can't see the connection, the Real, because in effect it "never really exists." It can't be symbolized. It is a surplus interpreted as a lack.

Such monsters are knots created by suture, which is in popular terms any act of self-reference or recursion. The knot is stylized as a cross, the line *not to be crossed* by the camera in filming a reverse-angle shot, the camera *not to be looked at* by the actors lest they abolish the diageitic illusion. This line *is* crossed; this camera *is* looked at, however, at precisely those moments intended to "tie the knot" (which could be written "not").

We, like the lowland spectators of Justizia, or the audience watching a mystery story, see the missing head and presume a monster. The uplifted (or buried) head of a building (or a goddess) is missing — we are confused — but this confusion is the key to invisibility.

Endnotes

1. The most read works-in-translation of Jacques Lacan are his *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan, New York: W. W. Norton, 1977, and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Sheridan, New York: W. W. Norton, 1978. Lacan's popularity has spurred the translation into English of other significant works, such as *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love, and Knowledge, Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, trans. B. Fink. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998, and *Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954, I, Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, I*, trans. J. Forester, New York: W. W. Norton, 1991. Fortunately for those who find Lacan's prose difficult (there were those who attended the seminar who found it hard to tell if Lacan was actually speaking French), the prolific Slavic author, Slavoj Žižek has provided an extensive exploration of Lacan's relation to popular culture, philosophy, history, and contemporary issues such as feminism, totalitarianism, capitalism, and technology. Žižek's thinking abounds in my own reflections on architectural criticism, and in this essay cited and uncited Žižekian influences provide a basis that I hope not to have abused too severely.

2. For background on this film that is both informative and entertaining, consult J. Belton, ed., *Alfred Hitchcock's 'Rear Window'*, Cambridge Film Handbooks, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000, and S. Sharff, *The Art of Looking in Hitchcock's 'Rear Window'*, New York: Limelight Editions, 1997. The Finnish architect and educator, Juhani Pallasmaa has maintained a web site on *Rear Window*, "The Geometry of Terror," www.safa.fi/ark/ark4_97/hitchcoche1.html, and has published a book on the subject of film and architecture that includes a study of *Rear Window*: see *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema*, Helsinki: Rakennustieto, 2001.

3. Heath, S. *Questions of Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981.

4. The Tower of Babel myth is certainly older than the texts assembled by at least three scribes to constitute the Biblical book of *Genesis*. Language is cast as the agent for the ambition of humans to connect heaven and earth, and this project is portrayed as aggressive rather than worshipful, hence God's alarm at its presumption. This ambition focuses on the top of the tower, which intends to connect directly with heaven. Of this group of modifiers, one might say that the "ambition" motif set in motion by the authors of *Genesis* goes a bit too far in explaining things. It ties up the question of the origins of language in a single act of revenge and leaves the tower as an architectural illustration of the linguistic theme. The Biblical translator E. A. Speiser and others note that the idea of a brick building in contact with the blue ether was incongruous for the more horizontally disposed Hebrews. The flat terrace that was subsequently the hallmark of ziggurats was taken to be the nothing more than the limit of construction at the time of Yahweh's decisive action. That is, the actual finished top of the Babylonian ziggurat was transformed

into an unfinished margin by an attempt to assimilate architecture into the language-complex. Interestingly, the historical ziggurats, including the famous *E-temen-an-ki* of Babylon, did not exist at the time of Genesis's writing. However, the authors had at their disposal a literary precedent from which they most likely drew. The *Enuma-Elish* describes the construction of a sacred precinct, *Esagila*: "The first year they molded its bricks. And when the second year arrived / they raised the head of *Esagila* toward *Apsû*." *Apsû* is, among other things, the blue ether of the sky, the cosmic source of sweet water. "*Esagila*" means, literally, "the structure with the up-raised head." The idea of a building with its head completely in contact with the ether was essential to the sacred function of connecting heaven and earth, a function more literally specified in the name of the later real ziggurat, *E-temen-an-ki*, "foundation of heaven and earth." See E. A. Speiser, trans., *The Anchor Bible: Genesis*, New York: Doubleday, 1962, 64.

5. For a review of the evolution of the Marlboro Man, refer to the National Public Radio broadcast transcript of Kathleen Schalch's report (October 21, 2002), found at www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/marlborman/.

6. Zizek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989, 95-96.

7. The theme of invisibility is strikingly parodied in the character of "Miss Lonelyhearts," a spinster neighbor who, at one point, entertains an invisible guest. The table is set for two, but no guest arrives. Jeff and Lisa look on as Miss Lonelyhearts welcomes and toasts her imaginary suitor. The scene is also a parody of the filming technique of shooting one "side" of a conversation at a time and editing the reverse-angle shots back into correct sequence.

8. Amazingly, the pans opening *Rear Window* duplicate the famous Lacanian figure, "the interior eight."

9. This study is too short to include some very important aspects of the film. For example, *Rear Window's* sound track is made up of "ambient" sounds of the city and courtyard. For the role of the *voix acousmatique* in this and other films, see M. Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. C. Gorbman, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, or the more specific "Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, The Fourth Side," in Belton, *op. cit.*, 110-117.

10. The idea that the audience is metaphorically "dead" in the act of spectatorship is ancient and the basis for exchanges between the designs of theaters and the conception of heaven (and hell) as a series of concentric rings. See R. Bernheimer, "Theatrum Mundi." *Art Bulletin* 38 [1956]: 225-247.

11. Thanks for this image to Prof. Matthew Rice, Clemson University, who exhibited it as a part of his paper, "Reflections on the Surface of a Genoese Painted Façade: Representation and the Cognitive Image in Architecture, Cartography, and Drawing," in *Contribution and Confusion: Architecture and the Influence of Other Fields of Inquiry*, 2003 Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture International Conference, Helsinki, Finland, July 2003.

12. M. Frascari, "The angelic view: Architectural drawings as wonderful demonstrations."
The Fifth Column, The Canadian Student Journal of Architecture, 7, 3 [1989]: 12-15.